

## COMMON SENSE IN COMMON NAMES

BY LUDLOW GRISCOM

THERE is now quite an extensive literature on the subject of vernacular names; the most recent, by Eisenmann and Poor (1946. *Wilson Bulletin*, 58:210–215), attempts to suggest some “principles” of vernacular nomenclature. I have read all these papers with much interest, and reflected on the subject for years. If I might sum up the approach of the various authors, their premises, implied or expressed, would appear to be as follows: 1) “common” names are of great use in popular bird study, and they must be invented if necessary; 2) unfortunately, many have proved to be too local, inappropriate, misleading, or otherwise absurd; 3) some “simple and logical principles” should be formulated, by which appropriate and associative names can be selected; 4) the A.O.U. Check-List Committee are earnestly begged to do so, and are politely taken to task for having done badly in inventing subspecific names in the past, and having let everything else slide; 5) we learn that appropriate and associative names should not: a) give a false impression of taxonomic relationship, b) employ geographic or political divisions, c) use names of persons, or d) use incorrect descriptive names like “Palm” Warbler.

It seems to me high time that amateur bird students should realize that there is another side to the picture. Not being a member of the Check-List Committee, I am free to say that they are neither a group of moss-back conservatives, nor are they uninterested pedants, living at ease in a rarefied atmosphere of technical names. Actually premises one and three are fallacious and the Committee probably know it !

1. Common or vernacular names are *not* necessary for the amateur naturalist, and it is a psychosis to think so. The only mistake earlier A.O.U. Committees made was to *start* inventing vernacular names. The poor men have been sunk ever since !

2. The growth of knowledge of natural history inevitably makes older vernacular names too local, incorrect, or absurd on one count or another. The same fate is in store for a certain proportion of those invented today for recently described or little-known birds.

3. No “simple and logical principles” for vernacular nomenclature can be formulated. There are far too many birds; their variations, relationships, and ranges are not simple or logical. Their habits and habitats change from season to season, from one section of the continent to another, from century to century. Which season, which habitat, which section of the country is to be the basis for the “appropriate or associative” name?

*Discussion.* The only real origin of common names in history is a matter of degree of interest and observation of native peoples. The English and Germans were pretty good, the Hawaiians were astonishingly observant, the ancient Greeks and Romans were atrocious, as are most Latin Americans. In English the words crow, finch, swallow, wren, etc. go back to prehistoric times, and only scholars might tell us what these words originally meant. Our forefathers applied some of these old names to American birds on fancied resemblances. Totally different American birds were given descriptive names, for example: hummingbird, sapsucker, and road-runner. Native names were adopted and anglicized for others: ani, caracara, jacana, chachalaca. Others were onomatopoeic: pewee, bobolink, whip-poor-will.

It was more than a century ago that ornithologists discovered that the variety of species was great, and more and more old English names became group or family names. Species names were invented here and there; Wilson and Audubon were by no means happy in some of their choices. But when all is said and done, most birds of the world have no vernacular names in any language, and the question arises, why should they? What is the matter with the technical or scientific names?

Amateur bird students' reactions to technical names are curious and inconsistent. They refuse to learn *Uria lomvia* (which means nothing), and are perfectly content with the "common" name Brunnich's Murre, which also means nothing! Who can show that the latter is easier to remember than the former? A startling contrast in attitude is discovered the moment one turns to other branches of natural history. There are numerous students of beetles, butterflies, shells, ferns and wild flowers, shrubs and trees—the number of competent women in garden clubs alone puts the membership lists of the leading bird clubs to shame—and in these groups of living forms an enormous and staggering welter of species, genera, and families are known; yet no one has ever suggested that common or vernacular names for them should be invented out of whole cloth. There are nothing but the scientific or technical names, and in no time at all the interested amateurs rattle off these "Latin" names as readily as ornithologists do those of birds. Many of my readers will have some spiraea, cyclamen, Forsythia, crocus, scilla, Wistaria, or delphinium in their gardens, and know perfectly well what flowers these names represent. They are all technical generic names, freely used in default of a vernacular name. What of it that nobody now cares or knows who Wistar or Forsyth were?

There are just enough cases of the popular use of technical names of birds to prove my point. The critics of vernacular names have never objected to cotinga, trogon, or junco. They have never suggested dropping vireo, and reverting to the old vernacular name "greenlet." No Californian boggles over Phainopepla. Students on a holiday go to the Rio Grande Valley, hoping to add the Texas Pyrrhuloxia to their life list, their fun not in the least spoiled because

of its lack of a common name! Other vernacular names are minor corruptions of the technical name, like tanager and gallinule, possibly fulmar and pelican. Bird students freely talk nowadays about Accipiters and Buteos, they work over the difficult Empidonax flycatchers; they learn the difficult warblers in part by learning the characters for the Vermivoras and the Dendroicas, two recognizable genera completely lost in the numerous inappropriate "common" names. In recent decades other students have begun to travel in the tropics; they wish to identify birds in Mexico, Guatemala, and the Canal Zone belonging to families and genera utterly different from anything in the United States. But after the first spasm of regret that there were no "common" names, they got down to work and became perfectly at home in handling and using the technical names.

The welter of vernacular names in many languages, the absurdity or inappropriateness of many, and the great variety of species or types, led to the invention of the Linnaean system of technical nomenclature. The "simple or logical" system broke down, by sheer weight of numbers, the hopeless complexity of relationships and degrees of difference. A code of nomenclature had to be drawn up, and with a little study it was seen that the only hope for stabilization in the future was to invoke the principle of priority, the earliest name, and in certain cases to conserve a long used and well known name. The code *has* to be complex and difficult, special experts now sit on permanent commissions and arbitrate as many difficult cases per annum as possible. Many early names, absurd, barbaric, inappropriate, incorrect, or "Rabelaisian" had to be retained.

Exactly the same fate awaits those who would reform or invent vernacular names. There would first of all have to be a code of nomenclature, and the principles would not be simple or logical. It sounds fine to select "appropriate and associative" names, but the only people who think it can be done are those *who are aware of very few birds in a small fraction of their total ranges only*. The fact is that the great majority of birds *can't possibly have* an "appropriate and associative" name, and the better known they are the more obvious this becomes. It makes no difference whether these names are good English words or are based on Greek and Latin roots.

Illustration must be limited to a few examples only. All American authors agree that *the* Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*) should be called the Black-capped Chickadee to distinguish it from the Brown-capped or Hudsonian Chickadee. This name is most inappropriate. Actually there are four species with black caps in the New World, and at least as many more in the Old. Moreover, there is a chance that our particular Chickadee may prove to be conspecific with one of them. Imagine the absurdity of calling one subspecies *the* Black-capped Chickadee, when every other subspecies is also black-capped. Moreover, there are several brown-capped chickadees, two species in North America. Finally

should "chickadee" be conserved? They are all *Parus*, the English name for which is "titmouse," and we are supposed to show relationships!

All agree that Blackburnian Warbler is a dreadful name; Hemlock or Orange-throated Warbler have been suggested. But it breeds in hemlock only in the southern parts of its breeding range, several other warblers nest in the same hemlock grove; it occurs in migration over an enormous area where there are no hemlocks; it winters in tropical rain forests in eastern Panama. Another "orange-throated" warbler occurs in Panama! I can see the active Canal Zone Bird Club of the future petitioning the Committee to invent a more appropriate name!

The points in the last paragraph may be expanded to the whole warbler family. I agree heartily with Messrs. Poor and Eisenmann that, ideally speaking, appropriate and associative names should *not* be open to criticism on the four grounds given in item 4 of the first paragraph. It works out as follows: Out must go Prairie, Palm, Worm-eating, Magnolia, Myrtle, Sycamore, Connecticut, Kentucky, Nashville, Cape May, Tennessee, Calaveras, Colima, Canada, Blackburnian, Audubon's, Wilson's, Swainson's, Bachman's, Virginia, Lucy's, Sennett's, Townsend's, Grace's, Kirtland's, Macgillivray's. Moreover, Chat and Redstart are names of Old World genera in other families; water-thrush is utterly misleading in family relationships, oven-bird is the name of a family in another suborder. The Blue-winged does not possess a blue feather, the Orange-crowned does not have an orange crown, the Cerulean is not cerulean, and the Black-throated Green is one of four closely related black-throated green species! No less than 40 out of 57 vernacular species names would have to go, plus 6 additional subspecies.

Even worse, none of them could be called warbler, a name properly belonging to the Old World Sylviidae. We have no sparrows, or flycatchers, and we must eliminate Robin, Blackbird, and Oriole. Murres are really Guillemots; the Pigeon Hawk can't catch pigeons and is a subspecies of the Merlin. The Duck Hawk is really one of three American subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon. The Marsh Hawk is a harrier, very distinct from *the* Marsh Harrier of Europe; actually it is a subspecies of *Circus cyaneus*, the Hen Harrier, a specific name which is absurd and must go also, as *Circus cyaneus* very rarely catches hens, and no more often than other species of harriers! Our buteos are really buzzards; the name, Sparrow Hawk, properly applies to a small accipiter; our Sparrow Hawk is a kestrel; our vultures are not vultures, an Old World group. And so I could go on and on. I estimate that 80 per cent of the current vernacular species names of North American birds would get thrown out, on the basis of the criticisms of Messrs. Poor, Eisenmann, Peterson, Pough, and others. Readers will please note that, on the same grounds, just about 80 per cent of the

*technical* or *scientific* names are objectionable also. Actually this sense of inadequacy or inaccuracy of both scientific and vernacular names is an excellent measure of a century's increase in knowledge of North American birds.

Let us now suppose that a Committee really does start work on a system of "vernacular nomenclature." Where do they start, and above all *where do they stop?* What "simple and logical" guiding principles will they use in deciding what proportion of the 80 per cent criticizable names will be thrown out or emended? They will discover that there are none; the rules of vernacular nomenclature will prove to be just as complicated and just as arbitrary as those for the technical names. The Committee will probably end by adopting the same principle of priority and conserving all well known names in general use a whole century.

If they junk all 80 per cent of the inappropriate names, they will have to invent several thousand "appropriate and associative" names. Mostly, none can be found for family, genus, species, and subspecies. What is an appropriate family name to replace the inaccurate "warbler," a generic name for chat, oven-bird, water-thrush, and redstart? A much discussed species without a good vernacular name is *Vermivora ruficapilla* Wilson, going back to 1811. The eastern subspecies bears the absurd name, Nashville Warbler, and the western race bears the equally absurd name, Calaveras Warbler. Actually, the technical name is also absurd and inaccurate. Translated it means "rufous-haired worm-eater." Now the members of the genus *Vermivora* don't eat worms any more than other warblers. The species also has very few rufous hairs. Virginia's and Lucy's Warblers are the two species of the genus which *are* rufous-capped, but they were not discovered until 50 years after Wilson shot his warbler at Nashville, Tennessee. Perhaps I am a pedant when I see no reason to reform vernacular names, any more than the technical. To those who have frequently argued that most amateurs can't translate Latin and Greek roots, I point out that the names, Nashville and Calaveras Warbler, are absurd, inaccurate, meaningless, and therefore no easier to memorize than *Vermivora ruficapilla*, actually the only species designation the poor little bird has at the moment.

Let's waive all this, and pass to the invention of the four necessary vernacular names. Surely it is more important to have the family name taxonomically correct than the specific name. The family name, "Wood Warbler," will scarcely do for chats, yellow-throats, prairie "warblers," water-thrushes, and other ground and thicket-inhabiting birds. The subspecific names for *Vermivora ruficapilla* are easy: "eastern" and "western," but eastern what? I feel I know this warbler very well, and not only its technical or specific characters, for I have had field experience with both subspecies on their breeding grounds, migration routes,

and winter ranges. For many years I have been quite unable to think of a "simple, appropriate or associative" name that would be valid in all sections of the country, or a descriptive adjective that would apply to this species of "warbler" only. There are too many warblers, and the diagnosis of this species cannot be boiled down to one or two English adjectives. All the vernacular names suggested are too local, only partially true, or not sufficiently restrictive.

If we had a Gallup poll, and a thousand bird students of proper geographic distribution sent in a name on a postcard, it would be very surprising if a hundred of them picked the same one. Meanwhile the A.O.U. Committee has agreed to provide a species name; whatever one they dig up, my guess is that they will be soundly denounced by a certain percentage of students.

I hope I have succeeded in showing to unprejudiced readers that all is not as easy as it sounds. Vernacular English nomenclature *must* be just as complicated as scientific nomenclature. Naturalists abandoned seven decades ago, as a result of bitter experience, all efforts to reform technical species and group names by throwing out inappropriate and inaccurate ones, because: 1) unanimous agreement could never be reached and 2) the apparently more appropriate name turned out to be inappropriate in another decade or two with increased knowledge.

Those who wish for a reform of vernacular names must be prepared to jump four tough hurdles: 1) Complete or partial reform; if the latter, what dividing line? 2) Either way, a code of nomenclature must be drawn up, it must be administered by a commission, and it will be a five or more years' job to reach general agreement on the improved vernacular names. 3) The improved new vernacular names will automatically *create a synonymy* of English names, as well as the already existing synonymy of technical names, a burden and a handicap to scientific work. Every text-book, guide, State, and local list of the present will be out of date. A new generation of amateur bird students, brought up on the new names, will have to have the names in Chapman's books, Forbush, Ridgway, and several hundred others, translated for them by "technical" experts. Perhaps Mr. Peterson's publishers will go to the expense of getting out a new edition of his guides, with the necessary synonymy of vernacular names. 4) The new names having been invented and officially published, what happens next? Are they *to be conserved*, or is every new A.O.U. Check-List Committee to be allowed to change some, the moment they think another name a real improvement? What is to prevent each Committee from expressing themselves by playing ducks and drakes (with special reference to *Tadorna* and *Casarca*) with the common names? What is to prevent a "reactionary" committee from reverting to the "good old" names, warbler, robin, oriole, and flycatcher?

A primary article of the code will, therefore, have to be an arbitrary rule that the new names in the new A.O.U. Check-List of 195—

will be conserved. Its protagonists had better make sure in advance that unanimous approval, consent and obedience have been obtained. In the meantime, I formally propose that the names in the 1931 A.O.U. Check-List be conserved.

The protagonists of reform in vernacular names must pass from destructive to constructive criticism. Their criticisms are perfectly valid; they have merely discovered for themselves what ornithologists have known for a century: vernacular names in every language, and scientific and technical names as well, are replete with absurdities, inaccuracies, and false taxonomic implications; there are not enough descriptive adjectives in any language to replace geographic names and names of persons, and there are too many birds with too complex degrees of relationship. In the sense that English words like crow, wren, and warbler are nouns, there simply are not enough bird nouns for the hundreds of families and major groups known today. So far, the best proof of this is the few suggestions thrown out, by way of illustration, of improved names in articles otherwise purely critical. Any competent ornithologist can find fault with any one of them *extempore*, as not satisfying the criteria for good vernacular names agreed to by the critics themselves!

I consequently respectfully offer the following suggestions to those friends of mine interested in the reform of vernacular names.

1. The failure of the A.O.U. Committee to act is because they believe, or know, that simple, logical, appropriate, associative, and taxonomically correct vernacular names cannot be invented for the families, genera, species, and subspecies of North American birds.

2. Those who think it can be done might at least produce such a revised list and secure agreement *throughout the country* among amateurs interested in vernacular names.

3. Reform should begin with the names of families and major groups, the names of species and subspecies should come last. To return to the Nashville Warbler, why get excited about "Nashville" and not about "Warbler"? At least the species passes through Tennessee every spring and fall, but it positively is not a warbler!

4. Coining names for subspecies is a waste of time. This is one thing the critics of vernacular names have indirectly proved. All of them agree that the main reason for discussion is because vernacular names are of so much use in the development of popular ornithology. But there is no such thing as popular study of the finely drawn subspecies of the day, so there is no need for vernacular names. The subspecies of the moment is dropped tomorrow, or it will become two subspecies, or a revision of the races of some species results in a completely different arrangement. The newly invented vernacular name disappears. Or to which one of the two new subspecies shall it apply? It

might prove inappropriate for both. A "western" junco was collected in Massachusetts in 1874. It has already appeared in literature under *four* different vernacular names. It will undoubtedly appear under a fifth as a result of Dr. Miller's recent monograph. Those who invented the first four vernacular names wasted their time. Why should there be any better luck with the fifth?

5. In those few cases where subspecies are distinguishable in life and are, therefore, subjects for popular study and observation, well known vernacular names are already available and should be used. This in itself would be an expert guide to beginners, as to which subspecies could be identified in life.

MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY, CAMBRIDGE 38, MASSACHUSETTS